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ABSTRACT

Corporate advocacy is the study and practice of communication efforts to advance the policies of business, education, governmental, and nonprofit institutions. The functions of the advocate include gathering information, providing advice based on the information, conducting advocacy programing, and evaluating results. Advocacy research is increasing and has a strong public affairs thrust. Externally, opinion surveys and public relations audits are conducted to identify relevant publics and to determine opinions, knowledge, and relevant power, with some research in public policy forecasting and management of public issues. Internally, along with research involving information flow, communication climate, and employee satisfaction, there is increased research involving employee knowledge and opinions on relevant issues. Increasingly, attempts are made to evaluate the effects of advocacy campaigns and to relate those effects to organizational goals. The trend is toward quantification and more sophisticated statistical procedures. (FL)

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Research Frontiers of Corporate Advocacy

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Corporate advocacy is the study and practice of communication efforts to advance the policies of business, education, governmental, and non-profit institutions. The functions of the advocate include gathering information, providing advice based on the information, conducting advocacy programing and evaluating results. Related to all functions, research is particularly important in information gathering and evaluation. While virtually all forms of research are conducted, this paper describes research related to opinion, knowledge, perceptions and values. First, the influences on research are discussed and then research trends are described.

Influence on Research

Most corporate advocacy research is applied--conducted to meet the needs of the organization. Contemporary research is influenced by the intense social pressures perceived by organizations, by an increasing demand for accountability, and by changes in the role of the corporate advocate. Organization managers feel besieged by special interest groups, consumers and government regulators. There is a feeling that the public has lost confidence in institutions and the free enterprise system. Institutions are under the scrutiny of a growing number of advocacy journalists who specialize in reporting news and opinion on specific topics such as finance or the environment. Concurrently, there is an increase in the number and scope of laws which regulate business activity. Uncertainty about the opinions and potential actions of publics or agencies which may affect organizations has stimulated research in the environment, energy, economics, and government policy formation.

Accountability, especially public accountability for actions related to prominent social issues seems unavoidable. In response, institutions are seeking information about current and future issues, conducting advocacy campaigns and becoming more concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of campaigns. In increasing numbers, organizations are monitering public trends. An estimated four

billion dollars was spent by government and private organizations on sample surveys in 1978 (Bailar, 1979). Companies are "going public" in an effort to influence opinion. Chief executive officers are becoming more active in public affairs. Gulf and Western purchased sixty-three pages of Time (1979) to publicize to millions a special edition of their annual report. And, in 1978 there were seven hundred political action committees formed by corporations to influence the political process. Also, accountability is becoming more important within organizations. Public affairs units are held responsible for the quality and quantity of information they provide and for evaluating the impact of advocacy programs on organizational goals. There is a trend toward increased sophistication in the measurement and interpretation of public opinion.

Another influence on research is change in the status and role of public affairs executives. An increasing number occupy vice-presidential positions. As such, they report directly to chief executive officers and participate in policy decisions. In addition, these officers are not only viewed as responsible for communications directed from the company, but they serve as representatives of the social conscience of the organization. The advocate often attempts to influence policy in ways congruent with contemporary social values which are of concern to the public or employees.

Research Activities

Developing trends in research are most apparent in the information gathering and evaluation functions. Information gathering activities are divided into external activities which focus on the relationship of the organization to its publics and internal activities which occur mainly within the organization.

External research. While readership surveys and content analyses are sometimes conducted, the most frequently employed types of external research are environmental monitering, public relations auditing, and social auditing (Lerbinger, 1977).

Environmental monitering involves keeping track of trends in opinion, often through subscription to commercial opinion surveys. These studies provide information on opinions about the concentration of power in large companies, relative trust in institutions, ethical practices, and the social obligations of business (O'Neil, 1977). These surveys are being interpreted with increasing sophistication. Smith (1978) pointed out that the specific characteristics of a given polling organization do not bias data extensively, but that both house effects and survey effects do occur.

In addition to broad opionion studies, public relations audits are used to estimate opinion and knowledge on issues of interest to a specific organization. While there is no standard form of audit, it typically involves determining the relevant publics and influentials, assessing issues of concern, and assessing the relative power of the publics. Often opinions, relative knowledge and communication patterns are explored. Bethlehem Steel used surveys on specific topics in designing a corporate advertising campaign aimed at politically active individuals with twenty thousand plus incomes who were between twenty five and sixty-four years old (Latshaw, 1977). In summarizing studies on the environmental issues, Grunig (1977) points out that while people are concerned about the environment, they do not closely associate the problem with their own lives, only a small portion of the population is actively concerned. He suggests that only the concerned are likely to be interested in communicating about the topic or to seek and be receptive to communication about the topic. Broom (1977) believes that knowledge of opinions is not enough and favors research which delves into cognitions and understanding of issues. He suggests coorientational measurement which determines accuracy, discrepancies and congruities of understanding by the public and the organization. One increasingly popular application of survey results is public issue management which includes issue identification, issue analysis, priority setting and task force issue management (Chase, 1977).

Research in public policy forcasting and social audits is

also developing. Molitor (1979) claims that new legislation and regulations can be predicted. He suggests a cumulative schema of preliminary abstract indicators of change followed by practical and tangible indicators. The preliminary indicators include the origin of an idea, testing and modification of the idea, public communication of the idea, and the formation of interest groups. Tangible indicators include adoption of the idea in pace-setting countries or states, wide-spread implimentation of the idea, judicial review and executive enforcement. Institutional social responsibility is receiving increased emphasis. Social audits are conducted to provide a system of estimating an organizations activities in terms of relevant social issues. Occasionally, the results of these audits are made public and used in advocacy campaigns. Still in their infancy, social audits reflect the concern for arriving at an appropriate balance between social and economic values (Crawford & Gram, 1978).

Internal Research. Markley (1979), chairman of the National Association of Manufactures, states that management is vitally concerned about the quality of communication within the organization. Typical internal communication research is indeed the same as what many call organizational communication research. In their summary of research in this area Dennis, Goldhaber and Yates (1978) report that the trend is to use larger samples, self-report surveys and trained observers to collect data. Also, more complex statistical analyses are employed. Variables include environmental uncertainty, perceived job satisfaction, perceived coordination, managerial performance ratings and perceived organizational effectiveness. Goldhaber, Yates, Porter and Lesniak (1978), describing the state of the art, report research in information flow and the perception-attitude areas. Information flow includes structural configurations, communication roles, channel, and message. Perception-attitude research includes perceptions of climate in relationships, perceptions of information adequacy and perceptions of satisfaction. The ICA Communication Audit provides a standard approach to exploring many of these variables and has a data base derived

from studies of seventeen different organizations. Brooks, Callicoat and Siegerdt (1979) report that the audit has demonstrated value and resulted in perceived changes in organizational effectiveness.

In their survey of business organizations Lahiff and Hatfield (1978) found a dramatic increase in the receptivity of organizations to input from the public. Some efforts are in progress to study the conditions in the organization under which accurate information flows into the organization. Grunig (1978) found that conditions conducive to high accuracy included employees who were: (1) highly involved in activities outside the organization, (2) high in level of problem recognition, and (3) free from constraints on possible actions available to them.

Another trend is to use employees as ambassadors of the organization's point of view (Skinner and Shanklin, 1978). Organizations attempt to educate employees on issues and encourage them to formally purvey the information through speakers bureaus or through informal communication in their community. Unfortunately, employees may be less willing to accept management communications. Lahiff and Hatfield (1978) indicate that there is a trend toward skepticism and an inclination to question management's communications. Research related to enhancing managements credibility may be needed.

Evaluation. There are clear pressures for communication practioners to provide hard data which supports the claim that internal and external communication programs are effective (Van Riper, 1976). Attempts to evaluate programs are increasing, but the task is difficult and complex. What should be evaluated and how should the evaluation be conducted? Kirchhoff (1977), in his discussion of policy research and organization objectives, describes two models. One is a multiple equation model of effectiveness which expresses multiple goals and the other model estimates performance on one goal. The former model has proven difficult to implement and interpret; the latter is more frequently used. For example, Armstrong Cork sets specific communication goals in terms of stories in print and broadcast time. Results are compared

with the relative costs of equivalent coverage through paid advertising (Marker, 1977). A high percent of companies engaged in corporate advertising have done some probing of effectiveness. Generally they are dissatisfied with the results (Sachs & Casin, 1977). Internally, there are a large number of possible variables to measure. For example, Farace, Taylor and Stewart (1978) discuss twenty-one possible criteria for evaluating effectiveness of communication in organizations. But, there is a problem of relating these criteria to general organizational objectives. Further, many organizations do not have written objectives for their employee communication programs (Williams, 1978).

While there are no standard variables for evaluation, strategies are suggested. Stamm (1977) believes that evaluators should look at the communication problem from the perspective of the individual as well as that of the organization. He suggests several strategies to use in selecting appropriate variables and urges prior planning rather than after-the-fact evaluation efforts. Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1977) argue that a high level of public communication or increased understanding of the issues or early support of community leaders does not necessarily lead to success of community relations programs. They propose study of the conflict process in a community and of the structure of communication channels as independent variables; and study of understanding and opinion as dependent variables. McElreath (1977) suggests that the degree of environmental uncertainty and the degree of problem recognition influence the evaluative efforts of an organization. When there is high uncertainty and high problem recognition, there will be a mandate to evaluate, relatively little knowledge of cause and effect, a high level of resources involved, and results which are likely to affect organizational policies.

Conclusion

Corporate advocacy research is influenced by the perceived needs of organizations. These needs relate to the social pressures

on organizations, an increasing concern for accountability and changes in the role of the corporate advocate. Advocacy research is increasing and has a strong public affairs thrust. Externally, opinion surveys and public relations audits are conducted to identify relevant publics and to determine opinions, knowledge, and relative power. There is some research in public policy forecasting and management of public issues. Internally, along with research involving information flow, communication climate and employee satisfaction; there is increased research involving employee knowledge and opinions on relevant issues. Increasingly, attempts are made to evaluate the effects of advocacy campaigns and to relate those effects to organizational goals. The trend is toward quantification and more sophisticated statistical procedures.

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